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## THE QUESTION OF CIVIC IMPROVEMENT

This is the age of asking questions; when everybody wants to know "how?" or "why?" The spirit of inquiring is in the air, and people are ceasing to take things for granted. Some of this, no doubt, is mere unrest or idle curiosity, but most of it is due to the impulse of the times, which is unwilling to do or suffer anything without seeing a reason for it. It is not strange, then, that the spirit of inquiry has passed beyond the region of learning and science, of law and politics, and possessed the average man, who is wanting to know about many things, amongst others "why?" should he live as he does and "how?" can he improve his living. And all sorts of people, sociologists and churchmen, philanthropists and dreamers, practical men and cranks, are trying to find out "why?" and tell him "how?"

This article will meddle with none of the more popular and burning questions of the day, with trusts and high prices, labor and capital, graft and civic dishonesty, but it will turn to a side of our daily life that affects us as nearly as any of these, and, one is almost tempted to say, as deeply.

In spite of our spirit of inquiry, there are still many things that we are too prone to take for granted, things that have been in the past and seem as if they would continue to be in the future. If there is anything that would appeal to our natural-born conservatism it is the way in which we live and the way we make the places we live in, our towns and villages, the homes of our communities; for these things have descended to us from primitive ages, and have changed so gradually that we do not notice the difference in most respects except at considerable intervals of time; many a man who thinks little of rearranging and renovating his own home would never think of applying a similar process to that of the community.

What kind of home ought the community to have? How would one make a town if one were able to start from the beginning? We plan our houses as carefully as we can, we arrange all the rooms to be of the best sizes, aspects, and positions for their several uses, to have the most convenient relation to each other,

and we study all the points bearing upon the future uses and comforts of the home with vast care and solicitude. Why should we not give at least as much forethought to the town, the common home of all? If, then, the town is the common home of all, it should be conceived and constructed for the greatest good to the greatest number. How is this to be achieved, and what would be the characteristics of the ideal home of the community?

People have assembled into communities from the beginnings of civilization for protection against enemies, convenience of business, the practice of religion and the diverse phases of social life, and, in short, for all those things which can only be achieved by co-operation. Such purposes can only be attained in their best kind and degree when the facilities for going to and fro, for exchanging ideas and for all kinds of communication, personal and otherwise, are the simplest and most efficient possible; when every available provision has been made for the general health, recreation and personal liberty; when light and air are free for all, and when all unnecessary noise, unsightly objects, bad odors and other impediments to the peace and quietness and leisure that are the right of every man have been eliminated. It will not require much reflection to show that each and all of these is everyone's business because they affect everyone, and therefore everyone has a personal interest in co-operating to get them. They are such as no one through superior wealth, social position, opportunity, or other reason, should monopolize.

Let us take these items separately and consider what they mean. What does easy communication mean and include? Nowadays we have so much complex and cumbrous machinery for moving ourselves or our ideas from place to place, railways, trolleys, telephones, telegraph, United States mails and newspapers, that in our satisfaction over the mechanical marvels all about us we are apt to forget the dangers and delays of steam and trolley lines, the blocks and other hindrances to traffic, the long-drawn-out and tortuous routes between one point and another, and the noise, clumsiness and inconvenience of it all. Now, can this be improved, and if so, how? A few days ago the writer had occasion to go by trolley from City Hall Park, New York, to Bergen Beach, Brooklyn. It took twice as long to travel the first

third of the journey (to the Plaza Prospect Park) as the second two thirds; and this, not in the evening when out of town traffic is heaviest, but in the morning when it is lightest. The reason was quite obvious; for the first third of the route several lines were confined to two or three crowded streets, after which they branched in different directions. Now this delay which brings the average pace of a car that can and does on occasion travel twenty miles or more an hour down to five or six miles, means much more than compelling casual travellers to spend an unconscionably long time in getting across Brooklyn. It means that the multitudes who are compelled to make their homes at great distances from their work must spend from one to two hours of every working day that might and should be devoted to their own uses of profitable work or rest or recreation, in cars that crawl from stop to stop with maddening and perfectly avoidable delays; that they must fight savagely with each other to get places, and hold them by painful and humiliating crowding, and by the exercise of a fortitude, a patience and a resolution that make the judicious grieve to see it so pitiably ill applied. It means that all these throngs who thus fight and suffer for their daily bread and their equally necessary daily transit are wasting a quite incalculable amount of energy in a conflict with their neighbors that could and should be used in friendly intercourse with them, in dignified and profitable leisure or in invigorating and useful work; be it only a pipe and paper on the porch, or hoeing the garden, or a game at croquet or baseball. It is not difficult to believe that this ceaseless and discouraging labor must sap the strength of an entire class, leaving little for anything but daily work and travel, and must seriously let and hinder their moral and mental growth, concentrated as their best attention is on trivial anxieties and efforts that uselessly absorb their time and strain their minds and endurance.

Anyone who has seen the infamous "Brooklyn Bridge crush" or tried to reach a distant point in the rush hours, will believe that these conditions and their consequences are not exaggerated. Conditions of the same kind produce similar results on Manhattan Island, and its population, permanent and transient,

though to a less degree, for they do not depend so much on surface cars.

What is the principal cause of all this? It is neither more nor less than bad street planning. Now that it is too late we can see that if these two great cities -- for that is what they virtually are -- had been properly planned in the beginning, with the skill that made Washington and modern Paris what they are, there would have been no transit problem. There would have been long, straight avenues intersecting the cities in all essential directions, and they would have been of sufficient width to allow the free passage of all traffic with lines of express cars where necessary; and they would have been so arranged as to distribute the traffic in all directions instead of confining it to a few narrow and congested streets. Many modern conditions, of course, such as elevated railroads and bridges over the East River, could not have been foreseen; but even as things are, the most enlightened and economical policy in the long run would be to spend a few hundred millions in gradually making the street plan of Greater New York what it ought to be; for the expenditure of great sums of money is as nothing compared with the raising of the standard of efficiency, leisure, comfort and self-respect of a whole population. This instance of Greater New York is an extreme one; but for that very reason it is likely to be the more striking. What New York is, any town may become in proportion to its growth; and the lesson taught by planning here cannot be learned too soon by the smallest village which has any civic spirit.

So much for the value of easy communication to a city. What shall be done for its health? The maker of the ideal city would pay little attention to hospitals and other machinery for curing disease; these would take care of themselves. He would try to prevent it as far as possible by planning his city so that preventable disease did not exist; so that plenty of light and fresh air were to be had by all who would; so that parks, playhouses and open spaces were within easy reach of anyone. Such things as pure food and water, proper sanitation, hygienic conditions in factories and workshops, prevention of crowding, could be best attained by cultivating a public spirit that insisted on them;

but the properly planned city would make them all easier to get, and more efficient when gotten.

Moreover, the ideal city would be devised as much for beauty as utility, because beauty is as practically useful as things purely utilitarian. Applied to a city or village, it really means the elimination of the unfit, the pretentious and the untrue, whether they be found in a public monument or the home of an artisan. It does not necessarily mean the spending of much money on any public or private work, either a lamp-post or a factory building, but it does mean the lavish spending of thought. To be more specific, it means the planning of the streets, so that they will develop as beautifully as their uses will allow, the provision of sites for public monuments, the proper distribution of parks and open spaces, the generous planting of trees, the establishment of "civic centres," and the designing and arrangement of public buildings so that they shall be worthy in themselves and shall each enhance the effort of the other. In proportion as these things are done well, light and air, convenience of traffic and business health and quiet will be assured to the community, and its prosperity and happiness will be increased. One more reform the writer hopes to see begun and carried out. The time should not be far distant when car tracks with their noise, clumsiness and defacement to the streets will be replaced by motor cars running smoothly and quietly under their own power. The greater the traffic, the more need for this innovation.

In travelling through the South the need for a different point of view in civic life continually makes itself felt. Towns are ill arranged, streets are too narrow, dust is too plentiful, green spaces and trees are far too few, and too often little pride is taken in the appearance of the business part of the city at least. One cannot help thinking that under a sultry sun people should cultivate the outdoor life, working, playing and eating, and even sleeping as far as possible in the open air and under the shade of trees, or of sheltering roofs, as they do in the hot countries of Europe.

Civic Improvement in its broad sense may sound visionary and impractical to those who can foresee its difficulties and have had no time to study its facilities; but it has become and is

becoming a hard and undeniable reality in the case of many of our cities, and even villages. To mention a few, New York, Boston, San Francisco, Denver, Manila, Washington, Cleveland, Detroit, Toronto, St. Louis, Honolulu, Greenville and Columbia (South Carolina), amongst many others, have adopted plans of improvement of greater or less completeness. Many small towns and villages are following their example, and no place, however small, should think the subject outside of its consideration. Alterations in small places, in fact, are often more easily made than in cities, where buildings and land are alike very costly and vested interests so strong. No community, in fact, should be content to live and suffer under the mistakes of its forefathers, but should set about hopefully to correct them in the light of our more modern knowledge.

HAROLD A. CAPARN.

New York City.